

# Beards and Beemers

## A BMW ALASKAN ADVENTURE



words by Bill Costello  
photos by Bill Costello and Sons of Winter

When OTL's new friend Erik Christensen who built the popular two-toned green BMW Café Racer last year invited us along on an Alaskan adventure he organized, the Editor, Will Guyan, and me, OTL art director, jumped on board without a moment's hesitation. Who from the lower states would pass up such a great chance to ride BMWs across America's last frontier? All we had to do was show up at Erik's home in Alaska with a full beard and a BMW, since Erik decided to call his trip "Beards and Beemers." Women, for some reason, were exempt from the beard growing, but alas, metrosexuals from New York City were not, so I had to grow my first ever full beard in my entire life. How so many men walk around with itchy, coarse loofah sponges covering most of their face is beyond me! But, it did help me prepare by getting me in the Mountain Man mood.

Also invited was Chris Canterbury, owner of the custom BMW parts and bike building shop, Boxer Metal. (see one of his builds elsewhere in this issue) Chris was an acquaintance

and BMW mechanical mentor of mine for several years now, as he designed and built many parts of the OTL Café Racer, so it was exciting for me that I would not just finally meet Chris but also ride along beside him across Alaska. Which brings me to my next point, which is now quite common and familiar to those of you who have read articles I have written before: I was a complete novice in uncharted territory. I was heading to Alaska on a trip with several hundred miles of dirt riding, having never ridden on dirt before. Every one else on the trip lives up in Alaska with plenty of dirt riding experience, and Chris from Boxer Metal and Will, OTL Editor, are of course expert riders with years of all kinds of experience. Would I survive?? Let's just say I came up with the ultimate secret weapon to level the playing field. See sidebar on next page for details.

I'm not going to bore you with a diary of our trip including details of what we ate or how loud Will snores, etc... OTL

Magazine is not about articles like that, so instead I'll keep the words to a minimum and instead share some of the great scenes we saw on our journey. However, I do want to convey the emotions I felt during this trip. Simply put, Alaska is freaking AMAZING. I've toured the Alps on a GS through all the famous passes as I passed through 5 countries, so I have that to compare with. The Alps were amazing too of course, and to roads are all paved perfectly without a pot hole in sight, and the European culture and various languages and scenery make the Alps a must see on your bucket list. However, the scenery of Alaska is every bit as awe-inspiring as the Alps. But it is different: Alaska is a true frontier. There are more moose than people. In the Alps, you come down a mountain pass and every time there is a cute little charming town at the bottom where you can get gas and eat wiener schnitzel. In Alaska, you can ride on two lane roads for hours sometimes and not pass another vehicle. Or a house. You'd better plan your route because that next

gas station can be over 100 miles away! The sheer vastness of Alaska is what makes it unique. There is a certain type of person that this kind of land attracts, and as BMW riders, all of you already know lots of people like this—resourceful, steady-minded people who plan ahead and are prepared for anything life can throw at them. I truly enjoyed the company of each and every person I met on this trip, and I don't think it was a coincidence that every bike except one was a BMW. (The Aprillia rider wants to get a late model 1200GS) It is a great feeling when you travel to a far away land and meet a group of people whom you feel you could have been friends with for years already. As much as I loved the unique and vast environment of Alaska, it was really the people I met on this journey that made Alaska stand out from anywhere else. Granted Erik was the organizer who sought out interesting BMW riders, which made this trip a BMW-centric one. BMWs were the glue that stuck us all together





This wood-surfaced steel trestle bridge is part of the road to the Kennecott Mines.

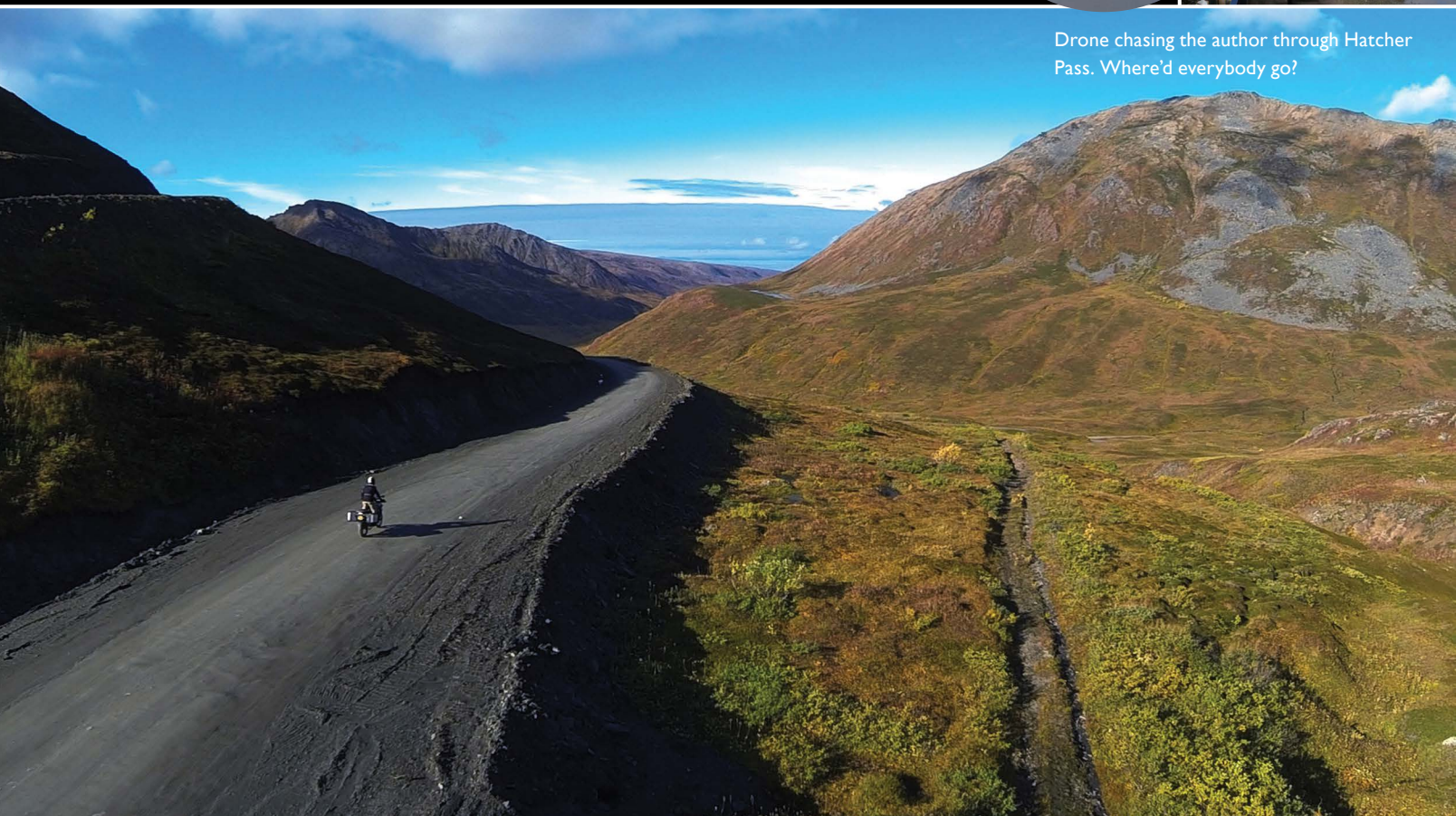
### Check out these aerial views

Erik befriended a small video company, Sons of Winter, to document the entire trip. One of their tools in their arsenal was a quad-copter drone with a camera that shoots both HD video and stills. They are working on a mini-documentary of the

Beards and Beemers ride which OTL will share with you via a web link once it's been completed. Look at these amazing wide aerial panoramas that really show off the vast unpopulated landscapes of Alaska. Shots like these previously would cost many thousands of dollars to set up using a film crew inside a rented helicopter.



Drone chasing the author through Hatcher Pass. Where'd everybody go?



Chris Canterbury of BoxerMetal.com, Erik Christensen, host of the Beards and beemers event, Will Guyan, OTL editor, and Yours Truly, Bill Costello. 4 bearded men from all corners of the USA, from age 30 to like, 80, all drawn together by a common love of BMW machines. Posing for a photo at the welcome party before the journey with beers in hand. Erik is obsessively detail oriented. He commissioned a local brewer to create a custom beer just for this event, with the essence of bratwurst thrown in for some extra manliness. (no comment) Seriously. The plan was to take the keg on the chase vehicle's trailer along for the entire ride, which worked out quite well during our evenings. Erik also had custom en-graved beer glasses made just for this trip, complete with etched logos! Well done, OCD Erik! All were extremely impressed..



The party was held at the home of vintage bike collector Mark Kapsner. He collects rare classics like Vincents, BSAs, BMWs, Ducatis, Nortons, and some rare classics that I had never heard of before. A retired airplane mechanic, which seems to be a common theme in Alaska, he also likes to build custom bikes and cars.



Custom Triton café racer?  
*Check!*  
Exotic feather-weight Italian racer with a supercharger bolted on just for the heck of it?  
*Check!*  
The Editor approves!





## The Amazing 1200GS Waterboxer

You've read plenty of reviews about this bike from experienced motorcycle journalists, but I'd like to share what this bike is like from the perspective of a rider who has never ridden on a dirt road and comes from a background of riding much older motorcycles with no electronic safety features. As I said at the start of this story, this GS was my secret weapon. I can imagine what the 8 or 9 experienced Alaskans must have thought when they heard a city-slicker who works in a cubicle on the 12th floor of a NYC advertising agency was coming along for the Beards and Beemers ride. To be honest I had my own doubts if I would survive this trip! Within the first 20 minutes of our journey, we hit a 15 mile narrow dirt pass with dry loose dirt and plenty of ruts from a previous rain storm. At first, following the others, I felt I was coming into every curve too hot and often I came way too close to the edge where the really loose gravel is. I thought several times I was about to drop this brand new GS, and well, wouldn't that be embarrassing! I slowed down and learned to loosen up and let the front wheel wander a bit and find its own way. Soon I be-

came comfortable and I looked farther ahead as I learned how to ride on dirt. With the suspension set to enduro, I had better control of the throttle modulation and the computer would let me kick the rear around a bit but it wouldn't let me go too far. As a beginner, I relied on the Stability Control to keep me upright even when I made several riding errors. I loved how I could hit the brakes as hard as I could and never slide. I started loving the rough roads! I felt the electronic nannies teaching me how to ride. By the last day I was literally flying over some very rough

roads, hitting 70 sometimes on surfaces that I was scared to ride at 30 mph on day one of this trip. The experienced riders were impressed and I neglected to tell them that it wasn't my riding skills at all. It was all thanks to the power and the active safety electronics. I knew that in time I could learn to ride properly, but for my first bike trip on long stretches of dirt and gravel, I sure was glad I had the most advanced adaptive suspension and stability technology of any bike in the world. It is hard to exactly pinpoint how many times the stability control saved me from

dropping the bike, but it must have been many times. What is obvious however is the sheer power of this beast! Once we hit highways, I'd gun the throttle and instantly pull away from all the various older GS's. Then I'd shift and it would leap ahead yet again. And again! I enjoyed the 2012 GS I rode through the alps several years ago, but it didn't have this kind of power. This one handles more like a sport bike too. I couldn't get over how quick the steering is for such a large beast! The improvements in this new iteration left me dreaming of owning a GS for the first time.



Chris would miss his anniversary with his wife if he came alone, so instead he brought Rebecca along, who for some reason didn't abide by the mandatory beard rule. Chris is a well known active participator on the ADVrider.com forum, and when he inquired if anyone had a spare sidecar to loan in Alaska, amazingly there was a local BMW rig owner just 10 minutes from our starting point who graciously loaned his beloved, obviously expensive GS sidecar rig to Chris. Most amazing of all is that this gentleman didn't charge a penny! Hearing stories like this make you think we humans might just be worthy of this world after all.

Being a GS, this rig could handle the rough roads, although as you'll see in a minute, perhaps the sidecar frame could have been made with a bit more gusseting—which would set the stage for the most exciting adventure of the entire trip!



Erik The Viking, I named him by this point, of course had to have a ride that stood out from the pack. Erik has a knack for acquiring unique machines, and this factory Dakar addition early model G/S certainly was unique. The bike has been modified slightly for Alaskan road trips but it is not far from its stock condition. Sadly, what was once one of the biggest, most powerful dual sports of its time was now a vintage, slow and unsophisticated dinosaur. Sure it is still just as capable as it ever was, and it can go anywhere a modern GS can go. But it will take you longer. I concluded during this ride while comparing my rented Waterboxer to Erik's R80 G/S, that the difference in performance between my 2014 edition GS and Erik's airhead is about the same as the leap from his G/S to my old 1958 R50. There was no stopping this old beast however. The old airhead did just fine.







photo by Sons of Winter

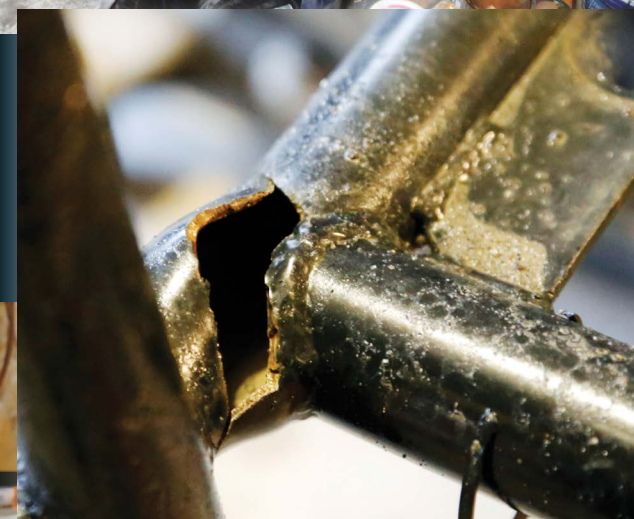
Our group went on a guided tour of the old Kennecott copper mine refinery. We followed the path that copper ore traveled through this massive 14 story wooden building and learned how pure copper was separated and refined from the green rocks that were mined nearby. In today's world of lawsuits and precautionary safety rules, I was amazed that we were even allowed into this massive death trap. Although it was reinforced along the tour path, there were still a few dozen ways to accidentally kill yourself. How refreshing to be treated like an adult for once! You wouldn't be allowed to have a tour like this in the lower 49 states. The huge interior rooms filled with massive shakers, belts, gears, and steam engines were very impressive but my photos don't do them justice, so you'll just have to go see it for yourself.



## Sidebar about the Sidecar

There was one event that really summed up the Beards and Beemers trip. The most secluded attraction of our trip was the Kennecott Copper Mill- a historical copper mill tour and a night in a grand, period-correct hotel which was once the living quarters of the upper management for the mine. This landmark happens to be inside a multi-million acre state park, and the only road there is a 60 mile dirt and gravel road filled with potholes. Chris from Boxer Metal and his wife were taking their time with the sidecar rig, as it was a bumpy ride. Alas, the sidecar wasn't built as strongly as the GS it was attached to, and on the 59th mile, the frame cracked, which caused the entire sidecar to twist and bend until it rested on its wheel. That rig was going nowhere. This was either going to be the end of Chris and his wife's vacation, or we were going to fix the bike somehow. Looking around, we were well over 60 miles off the grid. No towns, no electricity, no flatbed trucks. We did find a house with a small garage that had a sign out front that said Flat Tire Repair. It was after 5 and the shop was closed, but after banging on the door of the house for a while, a man emerged, and we told him our tale. He seemed skeptical that he could help until we told him we just needed to borrow his garage with generator power. He had a small prop plane in his front yard like many people in Alaska, and it turned out he had a gas torch for repairing the old plane. Perfect. The question was, did we have the skills among us to repair this cracked frame using scrap metal lying around this guy's shop? This was beyond my mechanical level so I'd provide the necessary photo documentation. But in our group of riders, we had Chris, a BMW mechanic and custom bike builder, Mark, a retired airplane mechanic with welding skills, and lastly there was Steve, who worked his entire career welding together the Alaskan pipeline! If it could be done, you couldn't ask for more raw talent than this.

Upon investigation, Chris realized the frame wasn't built with any gusseting on this cracked tube. Not only did the trio weld the frame together double thick with a smaller inset bar, but Chris also designed a gusset from some square tube stock, making the frame stronger than it was when brand new! The entire repair took just a few hours, and at the end, the owner of the shop took a better look at Mark the welder, and said he looked familiar. It turned out the two of them worked together 20 years ago! You can't make this stuff up.







We came upon this scene on the left page while at the Kennecott Mines. Only in Alaska would you see a scene like this! Abandoned structures from long ago decaying in a stunning setting is actually common here. While pausing for a photo op, I said to Erik, “You know, we could ride on that gravel path across that running stream. Wouldn’t that be cool?” We agreed that someone should try it, so before anyone else got the chance, I went for it. The video crew loved it so they had us all ride through the stream a few times for some neat footage. Afterwards, it was time to begin heading home and out of this park.

I was the last one remaining except for one of the camera crew guys, who motioned for me to make just one more pass so he could take a photo with his SLR. I had gone through this stream 3 times already and I told him that if I did a 4th, I’d surely fall into the stream. I had a feeling I was pushing my luck as each time my tires had slipped around in a rather unsecured way over the wet round rocks in the stream. But what the heck.

So my front tire wobbled and I hit that large orange rock in the photo above, sending me off balance. I made it to the other side, but I was heading towards the side of the waterfall in the photo on the facing page. I was about to go down a steep cliff! I quickly set the bike down along the side of the hill. I was past any point of embarrassment as now I was worried about scratching the rented bike as I signed a waiver that I would pay for even the slightest scratch on this new machine. Then I realized I was on the side of a hill and there was no way I could pull this bike up the hill by myself, and I dared not try to ride it as it was perched



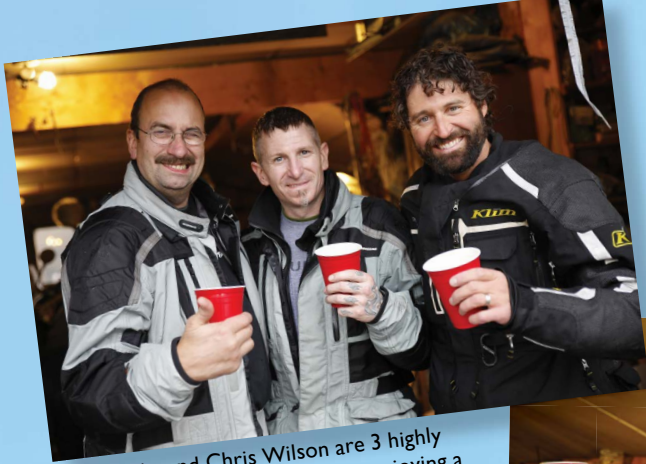
at a 45 degree angle and I could very well slip down the hill and wreck the bike. Since the photographer was too busy snapping photos like a good photo journalist, two hikers who saw me drop the bike came to my aid. Together the 3 of us were able to pull the bike up onto flat ground. I was sure that I scratched up the side of the GS as we had just dragged it through mud and gravel, but later on when rain washed away all the mud, I was amazed that the bike was fine except for some slight scratches on the valve cover. At this point I’d like to thank the rental company, Alaska Motorcycle Adventures. I’m quite sure they saw that I scratched their brand new GS and even though I signed the waiver, they were kind enough to let me slide. They are a top-notch bike rental company right in Anchorage and they have a great selection of BMWs to rent. I know I also signed a waiver that I would not ride off road, but if you look at the photo, you can see there was a gravel road that just happened to have a stream going through it!\*



At this point I don’t see myself taking one of those RawHyde courses, and as long as I live in the suburbs a GS is not in my future, so I will always cherish this awesome photo above of me crossing a deep raging river. Alaska is an amazing place and the best way to see it is by riding through it on a BMW. If you were ever on the fence, put it on your bucket list. There is no other state quite like Alaska. It pretty much is another country, except the people are friendly Americans. OK so they sometimes hunt coyotes hanging out the side of an airplane. But their local customs make sense once you learn how different life is there. I was honored when one of the locals in our group told me at the end, “You know, I never really met a yankee liberal from NYC. I thought I wouldn’t get along with you. But we are very similar.” I felt the same about him. 🇺🇸

\*In no way does Alaska Motorcycle Adventures condone this behavior and if you try something like this yourself you will be punished.





Welding crew completes their task

Walt, Taig, and Chris Wilson are 3 highly skilled dirt riders. Here they are enjoying a glass of moose milk after snacking on cookies.



The always fashionable 1940's Rebecca sipping Alaskan suds



The famous singer Kenny Loggins was part of our group



The author with a typical Alaskan car



At some point I began to wish more women had come along...



Jeff Loffert, Walt Adolphs, Mr & Mrs Canterbury, Chris Wilson, Bill Costello, Erik Christensen, Taig Hoeger, Steve Pohl, Will Guyan, Mark Bills, Dr. Dick Strohmeyer